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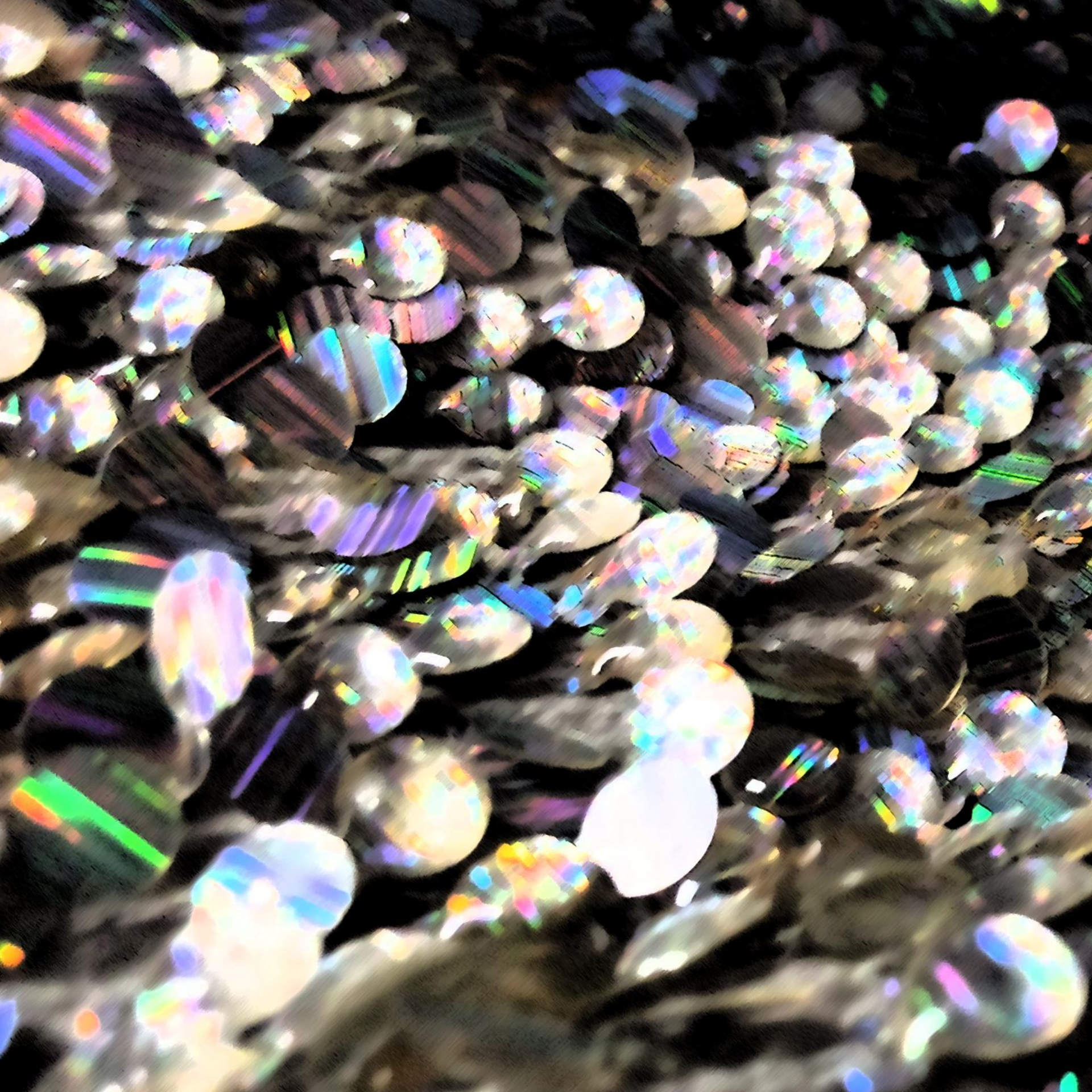


Issue № 165: The Vinyl Wingtips (Size 10 W) Spotted in the Elevator

Fowl Feathered Review is a quarterly, a disordered artifact of the human impulse to categorize and consume the ephemeral. Produced by the Springwound Mammoth Pancake Coalition—an entity distinct from its waffle-centric counterpart—it is birthed under the Fowlpox Press imprint. Virgil Kay, its editor, presides over this enterprise from a paper canoe adrift on the Passagassawakeag, a river of dubious depth and even more dubious inhabitants. Surrounded by featherheads and their aquatic card games, Kay's reign is absolute, his word the final arbiter in the transformation of boastful souls into doormats. Layout and visual conceits are the province of Cookie Granola, while melodrama and histrionics fall under the purview of Childe Harold. Silent Bill, in his characteristically taciturn manner, provides necessary pauses. The review's structural integrity, or lack thereof, is the domain of Unkie Bob, whose talents extend to the mitigation of typographical errors and the prevention of electrical conflagrations. Everett Enótita serves as Kay's indispensable amanuensis, and the Ecum Secum Literary Brain Trust, in a gesture of dubious beneficence, offers nominal financial support. Printed upon the verdant expanse of Bald Porcupine Island, and laced with the enigmatic Kraa, a bioengineered culinary enigma, the Fowl Feathered Review remains a testament to human ingenuity, or perhaps merely a symptom of cultural decline. ISSN: 1929-7238.

"I am an observer of life, a non-participant who takes no sides. I am in the regimented society, but not of it."

--Moondog, The Viking of 6th Avenue

Return Policy:
If this magazine does not meet your expectations,
please return it to us in its original condition
for a full refund, minus the cost of enlightenment.

Submissions

Fowlpox Press: A Submission Guide for the Determined (or Deluded) To the Aspiring Artist (or Sandwich Enthusiast):

1. **Craft** (or **Culinary Construct**): 2-227 poems, a numerical range that hints at both ambition and a troubling lack of self-editing, may find their way to our digital doorstep (fowlpoxpress@mail2poet.com). Alternatively, for the visually inclined, paintings numbered 2-953 (a prolific career, or perhaps a basement overflowing with forgotten canvases?) are welcome. We are also, inexplicably, open to submissions of twelve-inch sandwiches.
2. **The Gatekeeper:** Address your offerings to Virgil Kay, Editor. In posession of remarkably discerning taste, or so he believes, Virgil is a rooster of some renown, a creature of instinct and inexplicable confidence. His title, “China Wok Habitue,” suggests a broader palate than one might expect from a bird, though it’s more likely a testament to the local takeout joint’s generous portions. (**Please note:** Include a bio, a desperate plea for recognition that will likely join the unread masses in the digital purgatory of our slush pile.)
3. **Format:** Poems, those valiant attempts at capturing the human experience in meter and rhyme, should be attached in a Word document or PDF. Paintings, windows into your soul (or a weekend spent with Bob Ross reruns), must be submitted in JPEG, TIFF, or a format our aging technology can comprehend. Jokes, if they exist, should be delivered in MP3 format. We are, alas, not equipped to handle the nuanced art of the live performance. Sandwiches, a curious offering in the realm of artistic expression, require clear plastic wrapping and a small packet of Kewpie Mayonnaise. (**Pro-tip:** The Kewpie packaging is, undeniably, a work of art in its own right, and we encourage you to admire it before consumption.)
4. **The Cycle Continues:** We exist in a perpetual state of acceptance and rejection. A Sisyphean task, some might say. We receive submissions 365 days a year, a testament to the relentless hope, or perhaps blissful ignorance, of aspiring artists. However, with a heavy heart (and a full crop), we must inform you that rejections also occur 365 days a year.
5. **The Sandwiches:** Ah, the sandwiches. These, unlike your artistic endeavors, find a permanent home within our editorial sanctum. Virgil, in his infinite wisdom, has determined that a diet rich in carbohydrates is essential for maintaining his regal demeanor.
6. **Leap Year Follies:** Leap years, those extra days gifted by the whims of the calendar, offer no reprieve. Aspiring poets, it seems, are undeterred by such temporal anomalies. You are, however, cordially invited to "take a flying leap" during these additional 24 hours.

Please proceed with caution. Artistic aspirations are a delicate dance, and the path to publication is littered with the fallen hopes of countless dreamers. But hey, maybe your sandwich is killer. Just remember, Kewpie or bust.

Fowl Feathered Review | Poets & Writers (pw.org)

“Non ignora mali, miseris succurrere disco.”

— Virgil, The Aeneid

The Bathing Specter

By Jaden Holmes

Part 1: The Inventory

- **Subject:** Female, approximate age 30-40, designated "Subject A."
- **Location:** Varied residential bathrooms, urban environment, over a 5-year period.
- **Observed Behavior:** Repeated immersion in bathtubs of occupied, but temporarily vacant, dwellings.
- **Tools/Artifacts:**
  - Lock-picking tools (assorted).
  - Notebook (spiral-bound, water-resistant).
  - Contents of notebook:
    - Date, time, location (address).
    - Description of bathtub (material, dimensions, condition).
    - Water pressure (PSI).
    - Residual soap scent (chemical analysis pending).
    - Subjective notes ("cold," "ordinary," "turbulent").
  - Small vial, lavender oil.
- **Anomalies:**
  - Discrepancy between reported "routine" and observed behavior.
  - Collection of bath toys (origin unknown).
  - Subject's apparent disregard for risk of detection.
- **Hypothesis:** Compulsive behavior, potential for spatial mapping disorder.

Part 2: The Echo Chamber

The blue, a fractured sky, mirrored in the tile. A cold pulse, then warmth. The water, a skin against skin, a memory of rust. Mrs. Henderson's lavender, a ghost in the steam. 1A. A beginning? Or a repetition? The city's hum, a distant drum. They say, "She was trouble." Who? The mirror, fogged, a question mark. Am I a shadow? Or am I the one casting it? Each apartment, a cell in a honeycomb, a map etched in porcelain. The child's toys, a silent fleet, sailing in a sea of forgotten dreams. The jets, a turbulent sea, a white noise of escape. And the rain, always the rain, a metallic taste on the tongue, a symphony of ash and regret.

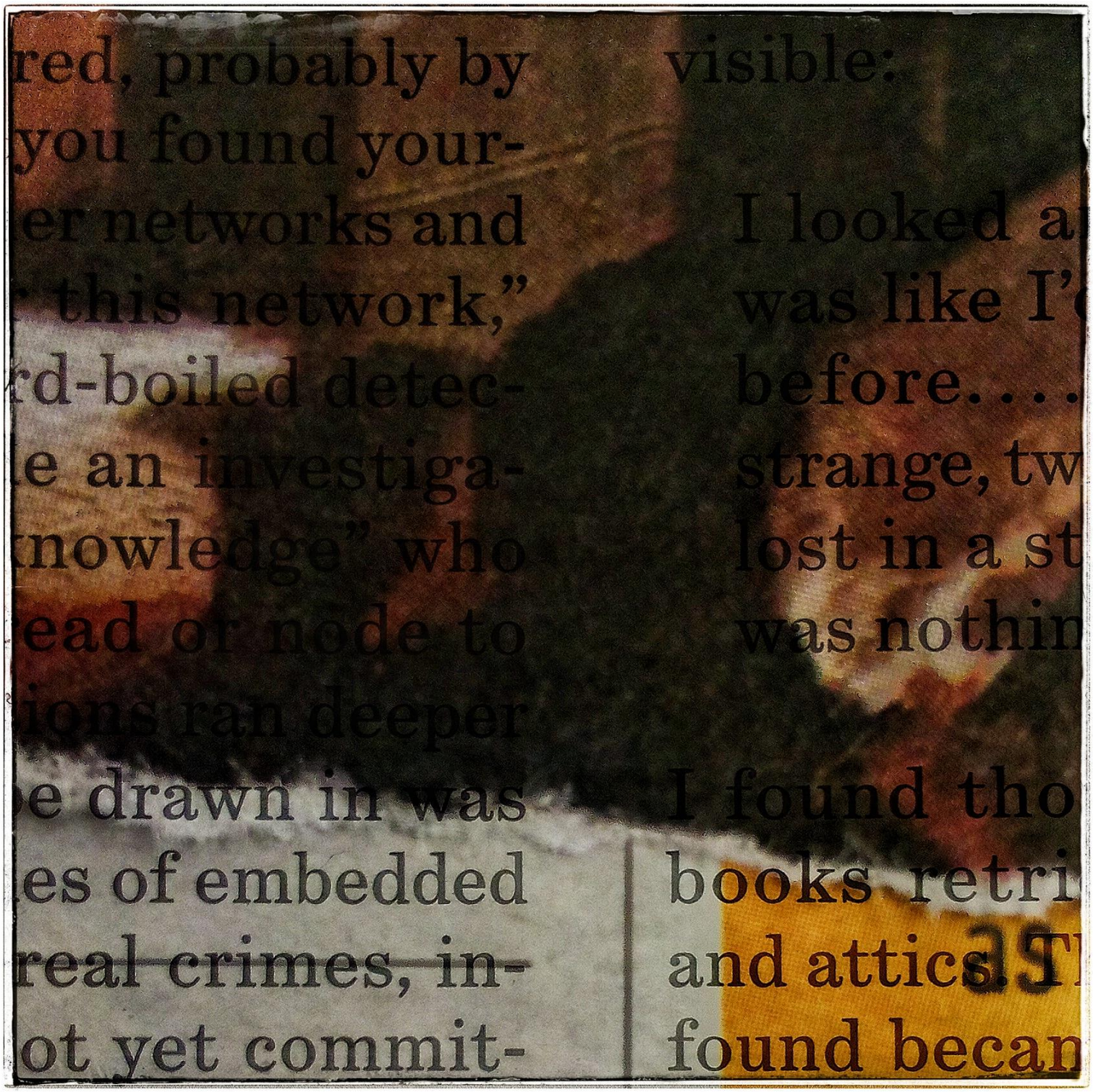
Part 3: The Detective's Log

Case file: The Bathing Phantom. Five years. That's a long soak. The city's whispering about a ghost, a woman who slips into empty apartments, just to take a bath. No signs of forced entry, no stolen goods. Just a lingering scent of lavender, and a notebook filled with cryptic entries. I've walked these streets, felt the damp chill, seen the flickering streetlights paint shadows on the wet asphalt. Each bathtub, a crime scene, a silent witness. The neighbors, they all have their secrets, their routines, their alibis. But something doesn't add up. A missing piece. A rhythm out of sync. And the question that keeps me up at night: what is she searching for in those stolen moments?

Part 4: The City's Murmur

(Sound of dripping water, echoing in an empty stairwell. Distant sirens, a fractured melody. The hiss of steam, the clinking of porcelain. A radio broadcast, snippets of news: "Local Man Disappears," "Strange Lights Reported," "Unidentified Woman Found..."). The rumble of the subway, a subterranean heartbeat. Footsteps on wet pavement, fading into the night. The rustle of a discarded newspaper, a headline glimpsed in the rain: "Five Years, A Quiet Obsession." A child's laughter, muffled and distant. The creak of a half-

open door, a whisper of wind. The city's murmur, a symphony of secrets, a chorus of unseen lives. The water, still, reflecting a fractured sky, a ghost's reflection. The game is over, or is it?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King's Crown: A Composite Novella

BY ELEANOR CLAIR-OBSCUR

Extraction

Dr. Arthur Plummet stands at his office window. The rain, a grey, endless curtain, falls. Has fallen. Will fall. Is falling. Through the glass, the parking lot of his dental practice in Rome, Maine (population 1,010, or was it 1,100? Perhaps 1,001?) appears both familiar and foreign, like a postcard from a place he's never visited yet somehow knows intimately.

"Your nine o'clock is here, Arthur," says a voice that might be his receptionist, might be his wife, might be his mother who died in 1978. The voice has the quality of a dental drill—high-pitched, insistent, boring into the soft tissue of his consciousness.

"Nine o'clock," Arthur repeats. "Nine o'clock." The clock's tick is a metallic taste in his mouth, then a spiraling staircase of rust. Time is no longer linear but a series of overlapping transparencies.

"Mr. Caldwell has been waiting twenty minutes," the voice continues. His wife, Margaret. Definitely Margaret. Her voice carries the unmistakable timbre of someone who has spent thirty-seven years correcting his posture.

Arthur turns. Margaret stands in the doorway, her silhouette sharp against the waiting room's fluorescent glow. She wears the blue cardigan he bought her in 1993. Or perhaps it's the one from 2015. The years blend like watercolors on wet paper.

"I was just..." Arthur gestures vaguely toward the window.

"You were just wool-gathering again," Margaret says. Her smile is professional, practiced, the smile of someone who has spent decades explaining her husband to others. "Mr. Caldwell needs that crown replaced."

Arthur nods. Mr. Caldwell. Crown. These are words he understands individually, though their collective meaning swims just beyond his grasp.

In the waiting room, the neon sign above the receptionist's desk hums, a fractured buzz, then a swarm of buzzing light. "Plummet Dental" it proclaims, though sometimes when Arthur looks at it, the letters rearrange themselves: "Plume Dental," "Lump Dental," "Pet Dental."

Mr. Caldwell sits in the corner, a newspaper folded precisely on his lap. Beside him, a man in a New England Bear T-shirt, with all six states abbreviated in a neat row: ME, NH, VT, MA, RI, CT.

"Can't have 'em all," mutters another waiting patient, a man whose face Arthur almost recognizes. "Got to pick a state. That's the rule."

"What rule?" asks the Bear Shirt Man.

"The rule of... of... singularity," the other man says, as if explaining something obvious to a child. "One man, one state. Otherwise, chaos."

Arthur understands this perfectly. One man, one state. He is in a state of confusion. Or is it Maine? The states blur together like teeth in an overcrowded mouth.

Margaret's hand is on his elbow, steering him toward Operatory 2. What is real, a question asked, then looped, then forgotten.

"Dr. Plummet will take care of you now, Mr. Caldwell," Margaret says, her voice carrying the authoritative warmth of a flight attendant announcing a delay.

Flight delayed, then delayed, then spiraled into a delay. Arthur remembers airports, or perhaps just one airport, repeated infinitely in his memory. The terminal stretched, a repeating corridor of grey. The floor tiles, a grid, then a shifting mosaic, then a sea of tiny, grey faces.

"Open wide," Arthur says to Mr. Caldwell, who sits reclined in the dental chair, mouth agape like a cave entrance. Arthur sees double, then sees multitudes, then sees only reflections. Mr. Caldwell's mouth contains multitudes—thirty-two teeth, or perhaps thirty-one, one having been extracted in 1987 by Arthur himself. Or was it Dr. Weintraub? Strange lights reported, then multiplied, then spiraled in the depths of Mr. Caldwell's molar.

"The novocaine," Margaret whispers, pressing the syringe into his hand. Her fingers are cool, efficient, the fingers of a woman who has spent decades compensating for her husband's increasingly tenuous grip on reality.

"Novocaine," Arthur repeats. "Nova. New. Caine. Abel's brother. Novocaine." The word breaks apart like sugar dissolving in hot liquid.

Mr. Caldwell's eyes widen slightly above his paper bib. Arthur smiles reassuringly, the smile he perfected in dental school, the smile that says, "This won't hurt a bit," though of course it always does, at least a bit.

"Just a little pinch," Arthur says, the line he's delivered approximately 86,000 times in his forty-three-year career.

Arthur administers the injection with the muscle memory of his hands, which, unlike his mind, remain faithful servants. His fingers remember what his consciousness has forgotten.

"That wasn't so bad, was it?" Arthur asks, though he's not entirely sure if he's asking Mr. Caldwell or himself.

While waiting for the anesthetic to take effect, Arthur studies the dental instruments arranged on the tray beside him. The explorer, the scalar, the burnisher—each one a precise tool for a precise purpose. Unlike words, which slip and slide and change their meaning, these metal implements remain steadfast in their function.

"Check if he's numb," Margaret suggests from somewhere behind him. She is trouble, trouble, trouble, then a looping echo of trouble. Not trouble exactly, but the constant reminder of his inadequacy, the witness to his slow dissolution.

Arthur pokes Mr. Caldwell's gum with the explorer. "Feel that?"

Mr. Caldwell shakes his head.

"Good, good," Arthur murmurs. "Now we can begin the... the..."

"Crown replacement," Margaret supplies.

"Crown replacement," Arthur echoes. "For the king." He chuckles at his little joke, one he's made countless times before.

Mr. Caldwell's mouth becomes a construction site, a renovation project, a puzzle to be solved. Arthur works methodically, his hands following the ancient choreography of dentistry. Drill, rinse, suction. Drill, rinse, suction. It's all a game, then the game repeated, then the game distorted.

In the midst of this familiar ritual, Arthur's consciousness slips sideways. He is simultaneously here, in Operatory 2 with Mr. Caldwell, and also in his childhood bedroom, watching his father pack a suitcase. The suitcase, a brown rectangle, then a spiraling vortex of leather squares. His father never returned from that business trip, or perhaps he did, but as someone else entirely.

The announcements over the school PA system, a droning voice, then a fractured chant, then a chorus of static. "Arthur Plummet, please report to the principal's office." His mother's tear-streaked face. The word "accident" hanging in the air like smoke.

"Arthur," Margaret's voice cuts through the memory. "You're drifting again."

Arthur blinks. Mr. Caldwell's mouth is still open, waiting. The dental drill buzzes in Arthur's hand like an angry insect.

"Just taking my time," Arthur says smoothly. "Precision work."

Margaret nods, but her eyes say something else entirely. Her eyes say, "This can't go on much longer." Her eyes say, "We're running out of road." Her eyes say, "I'm tired of this charade."

Arthur returns to Mr. Caldwell's molar. The tooth is a landscape, a terrain to be navigated. Hills and valleys of enamel and dentin. The exposed nerve, a red flag warning of pain.

And then, at the height of the looping, the spinning, the multiplying, the scene shattered, the words themselves began to twist, and a Skaldic echo arose:

'Waves whisper, winds wail, worlds woven, weirdly wrought; Shadows spin, stars shatter, silent sirens, songs unsought; Looped and lost, light's lament, labyrinth's lies, longing's lore; Fate's frost, forms fractured, falling feathers, forevermore.'

The verse reverberates through Arthur's consciousness, a momentary clarity in the fog of his mind. He completes Mr. Caldwell's crown with unexpected precision, as if the ancient Norse poetry has temporarily restored his faculties.

"All done," Arthur announces, removing his gloves with a snap. "Good as new. Better than new. Fit for a king." He winks at Mr. Caldwell, who manages a nervous smile in return.

As Mr. Caldwell rises from the chair, Arthur catches sight of his reflection in the polished surface of the dental lamp. For a moment, he doesn't recognize the old man staring back at him, with his white hair and lined face. Then the recognition comes, along with the knowledge that tomorrow, or perhaps the next day, he might not recognize himself at all.

Outside, the rain continues its relentless descent. A grey curtain falling, a grey curtain that fell, that had fallen, that was falling. Arthur watches it through the window of Operatory 2, knowing that somewhere beyond the grey veil lies clarity, or perhaps just another kind of confusion.

In the waiting room, the man in the New England Bear T-shirt argues quietly with the receptionist about insurance co-pays. The other patients pretend not to listen, their eyes fixed on outdated magazines.

"Next patient?" Arthur asks Margaret, who stands beside him like a sentinel.

"That's all for today," she says, her voice gentler now. "Time to go home."

Home. The word resonates like a tuning fork in Arthur's mind. Home is where the memories live, stacked like extracted teeth in a jar. Home is where Margaret will make tea and pretend not to notice when he calls her by his mother's name.

As they walk to the car, Margaret's hand on his elbow, Arthur thinks about the man with the New England Bear T-shirt. All those states, all those identities, contained in one shirt. Perhaps the man had the right idea after all. Perhaps one could contain multitudes.

Arthur Plummet, DDS. Husband. Almost-widower. Widower-to-be. Man of science. Man of confusion. All these identities, these states of being, abbreviated on the T-shirt of his existence.

The rain falls. Has fallen. Will fall. Is falling.

States of Being

The automatic doors of Plummet Dental sighed open, releasing Dave into the damp Rome air. The argument about the co-pay still echoed faintly behind him – something about tiered coverage and preventative versus restorative, words that blurred like the rain on his windshield. Dr. Plummet, odd as ever, had been muttering about kings and crowns. Dave adjusted the collar of his New England Bear T-shirt, the one with ME, NH, VT, MA, RI, CT stacked neatly down the front. He'd had that molar looked at – a dull ache that came and went, like a half-forgotten worry. Better safe than sorry. Especially with Lily coming for the weekend.

He started his pickup, the engine turning over with a familiar rumble. Friday. His Lily day. The forty-minute drive to Augusta always felt shorter on Fridays. He pictured her, probably already by the window, backpack at her feet, her gaze fixed on something only she could see in the shifting patterns of the clouds or the leaves.

The rain had eased to a drizzle by the time he pulled up to Sarah's house. Lily was there, just as he'd imagined, her nose practically touching the glass. She didn't turn as he walked up the path, but he saw the slight tensing of her shoulders, the subtle shift in her posture that signaled awareness.

"Hey, kiddo," he said softly, opening the door. Sarah stood in the hallway, purse already on her shoulder.

"Hi, Dave. She's all ready. Books are by her bag." Sarah's smile was tired but genuine. They had found their rhythm over the years, a careful choreography around Lily's needs and their separate lives.

Lily turned then, her eyes – large and serious – meeting his for a moment before flicking away. "Horses," she said, her voice flat but with an underlying current of excitement only he could usually detect.

“You bet,” Dave said. “Big trip to the library planned. Operation Equine Acquisition is a go.” He winked, but Lily was already focused on tying her shoelaces, a task she performed with intense concentration, looping the laces with deliberate, repeated motions.

In the truck, Lily sat buckled in, staring straight ahead. Silence wasn’t empty with Lily; it was full of her internal world, a landscape he only glimpsed occasionally. Sometimes, she would narrate her thoughts, unexpected streams of facts about constellations or the migratory patterns of birds. Today, it was horses.

“The Clydesdale originated in Scotland,” she announced, as they passed a field with grazing cows. “They have feathered legs.”

“They do,” Dave agreed. “Big fellas.”

The library in Augusta was hushed and warm, smelling of old paper and floor wax. Lily navigated the aisles with purpose, heading straight for the 798 section. Her fingers traced the spines, murmuring titles under her breath. “The Everything Book of Horses and Ponies... Album of Horses... Horses of the World...” Each book was pulled out, examined with solemn intensity, then either placed in her growing stack or slid back into place with equal care. It was a ritual, ordered and precise, like the rows of states on his T-shirt. ME, NH, VT, MA, RI, CT. Each distinct, yet part of a whole. Like Lily’s passions – intense, focused, consuming.

He watched her, leaning against a shelf of oversized atlases. That dentist... Plummet. He’d seemed more scattered than usual. Something about whispers and shadows. Dave shook his head. Some people just aged differently. Like old trucks – some rusted out, others just kept running, maybe with a few more rattles.

Lily approached him, her arms laden. “These ones,” she said, her gaze fixed on the top book, its cover depicting a galloping stallion, mane flying.

At the checkout, the librarian smiled at Lily. “Quite the horse enthusiast, I see.”

Lily didn't respond, her attention already on the due date slip. Dave answered for her. "She knows her stuff."

Back in the truck, Lily carefully arranged the books on her lap, her fingers tracing the embossed title of one. The late afternoon sun, finally breaking through the clouds, illuminated the swirling dust motes dancing in the cab, tiny universes reflecting in her serious eyes.

"Can we read about the Przewalski's horse first?" she asked, her voice soft. "They were almost extinct."

"Absolutely," Dave said, pulling away from the curb. The weekend stretched ahead, filled with the quiet rhythm of their time together, punctuated by facts about horses and the comfortable weight of shared silence. Each moment, like each state on his shirt, held its own space, its own meaning, all part of the map of their life together.

Fluorescent Hum, Equine Spine

Fluorescent hum, a sickly flower unfurling
in the waiting room's sterile air.
Plummet Dental. Letters swim, reform.
A man in bears, states stacked like vertebrae.
ME, NH, VT... Chaos averted, one man, one state.
Or was it molar? The drill's whine, a memory of pain.

Rain on glass, endless tape loop.
Has fallen. Will fall.
Metallic taste of the clock, gears grinding rust.
Crown for a king, the old man mutters,
lost in the labyrinth of his own making.
Looped and lost.

Then quiet roads, drizzle softening edges.
Pick-up truck rumble, father's journey.
A girl by the window, world in reflections.
Horses. One word, containing multitudes.
Clydesdales, feathered legs in fields of green.

Library aisles, hushed reverence of paper.
798. Order found, spines aligned.
The Everything Book... Her small hand traces.
Ritual of selection, equine devotion.
Each book a state, a world explored.

Fingers on embossed titles, sunlit dust motes.
Przewalski's horse. Almost gone, now held.
Silence breathes between them, full and known.

The hum recedes, replaced by turning pages,
the soft thud of knowledge settling in.
Worlds woven, not so weirdly wrought,
in the quiet space of love, and horses.

Gator (Decaf)

The new crown felt enormous, a weight, then a spiraling pressure, then a hollow echo in Arthur Caldwell's mouth. Dr. Plummet, a figure dissolving at the edges, then multiplying into a chorus of Plummet's, had muttered pronouncements – "Fit for a king!" – a voice droning, then fracturing, then a static hum. Margaret, always hovering, a grey shape, then a shifting mosaic of anxieties, her smile tight, then tightening, then gone. It had all been... off. A radio station slightly out of tune, then a swarm of buzzing light, broadcasting static alongside the music.

Driving home, the streets of Rome, Maine, a familiar grid, then a shifting landscape, seemed subtly altered. The green of the trees, too vivid, then vibrating, then dissolving into a wash of color. The clapboard houses tilted, then multiplied, then spiraled into a dizzying array of angles. He replayed the appointment: the drill's whine, a metallic taste, then a spiraling staircase of rust; the dentist's rambling, a droning voice, then a fractured chant, then a chorus of static. *Crown replacement.* The words echoed, then looped, then forgotten, taking on a sinister weight. Was something being replaced in *him*?

He pulled into the driveway, the crunch of gravel, unnervingly loud, then multiplying, then fading into a distant echo. Inside, the house, silent, then a repeating corridor of grey. His wife, Doris, at book club, a distant murmur, then a looping echo of voices. He went to the kitchen, poured water, the coolness doing little to soothe the strange thrumming, then a swarm of buzzing light in his nerves.

He caught his reflection, a man staring back, then seeing double, then seeing multitudes, then seeing only reflections. Older, then older, then dissolving into a grey haze. More anxious, then spiraling into anxiety, then gone. The new crown glinted, unnaturally, then fractured, then multiplied into a thousand tiny, cold lights. He touched it, a smooth surface, then a spiraling vortex of sensation. An imposter.

Then, the thought arrived, sudden and sharp, like a rogue firework, then a swarm of buzzing light exploding in the quiet. *Florida.*

He had no connection, a void, then a repeating corridor of nothingness. Images from television, beaches, retirees, alligators. *Alligators.* The image solidified, murky water, reptilian eyes, powerful jaws. An absurd thought, fully formed: he would drive to Florida and wrestle an alligator.

It made no sense. Arthur Caldwell, retired accountant, treasurer, a man whose adventure was decaf, wrestling an alligator? Yet, the idea lodged itself, a bizarre counterpoint, then a looping echo of absurdity. If the world could be wrong, if dentists could slip, then perhaps the only response was radical irrationality.
He found the camping gear, collecting dust, a brown rectangle, then a spiraling vortex of leather squares. He started pulling things out, a manic energy, then a spiraling frenzy.

Doris would be back. He scribbled a note, "Gone south," inadequate, then looping into inadequacy, then forgotten.

He threw the duffel bag, the highway stretched, an endless ribbon, then a repeating corridor of asphalt. He drove, fueled by coffee, then a spiraling vortex of caffeine, and a growing detachment. The crown, a constant reminder, then a spiraling echo of strangeness.

He thought of Plummet, lost in fog, then multiplying into a chorus of lost souls. Was this what happened? Did the edges fray, leaving you adrift? Maybe wrestling an alligator was grabbing onto something solid, even dangerous.

Dusk settled, shadows stretched, he found a rest stop, trucks and travelers, a grey sea of faces. Doubt flickered, then multiplied, then spiraled. Insane. Turn around. Apologize. Another dentist.

But then he touched the crown, that smooth, alien surface. Plummet's vacant stare returned. No. South. Heat, swamps, the challenge. Ludicrous, born of a morning, but *his.* And in a world losing moorings, a firm grip on the absurd was sane. He started the car, the engine's hum, a steady counterpoint, and pointed it south.

And then, at the height of the looping, the spinning, the multiplying, the scene shattered, the words themselves began to twist, and a Skaldic echo arose:

'Waves whisper, winds wail, worlds woven, weirdly wrought; Shadows spin, stars shatter, silent sirens, songs unsought; Looped and lost, light's lament, labyrinth's lies, longing's lore; Fate's frost, forms fractured, falling feathers, forevermore.'

Notes

Cockroach brain: peptide. A lock. Not host.

Alligator blood: hum. Rupture. Silence.

Ocean floor: fungi. Memory-old. A whisper.

Lechuguilla: bacteria. Unknown defense. Ours?

Swamp, cave, vein. Slow. Not yet.

Penicillin. Again.

Spoon

The siren, a metallic shriek, sliced the air, a physical thing. Not a sound, but a texture, rough and serrated, lodging itself between the rusted sardine can and the damp, crumpled newspaper. The cockroach, whom we'll call K, registered it as a vibration, a tremor in the mountainous landscape of discarded pizza crusts and decaying banana peels. His antennae, delicate sensors, quivered, relaying the data: resonance, metallic, cyclical.

The apartment, a topography of neglect, hummed with the man's presence. He, the tenant, the curator of this chaos, was a hulking shadow, a shifting mass of unwashed fabric and matted hair. K perceived him as a heat source, a source of scattered, incoherent movements. The man's Diogenes syndrome was a symphony of detritus, a performance art piece of refuse. The apartment was a stage, and the garbage pile, K's world, was the prime viewing spot.

K navigated the slick, decaying surface of a discarded yogurt container. The texture, a slick, yielding resistance, filled his sensory world. He did not think about the yogurt; he experienced its viscous residue. The discarded spoon, a gleaming artifact of human intention, lay half-buried in a mound of coffee grounds. It was a monument, a surreal intrusion of polished metal into the organic decay.

A scream, raw and untamed, erupted from the street below. A human sound, a fragmented utterance, a dadaist poem performed live. It was a disruption, a sonic intrusion, like a splattered egg on a pristine canvas. K's antennae twitched, registering

the sudden shift in the air's density. The sound had no narrative, no context, just a pure, unadulterated event.

The man moved, a slow, deliberate shuffle. A discarded sock, riddled with holes, fell from his outstretched hand. It landed with a soft, muffled thud, a new landmark in K's ever-shifting landscape. The sock, a symbol of human absence, became a concrete presence, a testament to the man's unraveling existence.

The siren returned, a metallic echo of its previous intrusion. It was a loop, a repetition, a meaningless cycle. Like the man's hoarding, like the scream from the street, it was a fragment of a larger, incomprehensible whole. K, the cockroach, the observer, the phenomenological subject, registered it all. He was a point of consciousness in a universe of decaying objects and fractured sounds, a silent witness to the absurd theatre of existence. The apartment, the street, the city, were all, simply, there. They were a collection of sensations, a collage of decaying matter, a surreal tableau of human entropy.

Fin

3

By **Antoninus Vergil Tosetti**

The wallpaper, a faded iris print, pulsed. Or perhaps it was the air, a thick, viscous soup of humid August Ypsilanti, 1959. Not the real 1959, but a warped, gelatinous version, like a photograph left too long in the sun. I traced the whorls of the irises with a trembling finger, each petal a tiny, desiccated map of Michigan Avenue.

The train whistle, a mournful, drawn-out cry, echoed from a phantom depot. Or was it the distant, distorted memory of a siren, the kind that wailed through the night when they took the men away? The men who believed they were Christ. Not just one, but three. Three Jesuses, inhabiting the same cold, brick building, a mental asylum masquerading as a sanctuary. Ypsilanti State Hospital, its name a dull, metallic clang in the back of my skull.

Dr. Rokeach, or was it a mannequin dressed in a lab coat, peered at me through thick, distorting lenses. He held a clipboard, the paper filled with scribbled equations that resolved into the shape of a Ford Bomber Plant, its skeletal remains rusting by the Willow Run airport. "Subject exhibits signs of temporal displacement," he intoned, his voice a static-filled radio broadcast. "Delusions of historical conflation."

I tried to speak, but my tongue was a leaden weight. I wanted to tell him about the irises, how they bloomed with the spectral gasoline fumes of the auto factories, how the train whistle carried the ghostly lament of the patients, each a splintered fragment of a forgotten prophecy. I wanted to tell him about the letters, the endless letters written by the three Christs, their words swirling into a vortex of theological debate, a cosmic argument played out in the cramped, sterile rooms of the asylum.

One Christ, Joseph, a gentle man with a carpenter's hands, argued for divine forgiveness. Another, Leon, a sharp, cynical voice, spoke of judgment and fire. The third, Gideon, remained silent, his eyes reflecting the blank, unyielding walls, a void where meaning should have been. Their letters, scattered like fallen leaves, drifted through the corridors, each a testament to the fractured reality they inhabited.
Outside, the streetlights flickered, casting long, distorted shadows that danced across the cracked pavement. A phantom streetcar rattled past, its passengers faceless, their eyes glowing with an eerie luminescence. They were the ghosts of Ypsilanti, the echoes of a town built on dreams and shattered realities.

I found a discarded newspaper, its headlines screaming of Cold War paranoia and the rise of rock and roll. But the ink was smudged, the words blurring into a meaningless jumble. A single photograph remained clear: a black and white image of the Huron River, its waters dark and still, reflecting the distorted image of the asylum.
The irises on the wallpaper began to wilt, their petals curling inwards, their colors fading into a dull, grey pallor. The train whistle faded, replaced by the rhythmic hum of the fluorescent lights, a constant, droning reminder of the sterile, clinical world that surrounded me.

The three Christs, their voices merging into a single, dissonant chorus, chanted a litany of forgotten names, their words echoing through the empty corridors, a haunting lament for a town lost in the labyrinth of its own history. The irises, the train whistle, the letters, the ghosts, all swirling together in a kaleidoscope of fragmented memories, a fever dream of Ypsilanti, a town where the past and present collided, where reality itself was a malleable, shifting landscape. And I, a solitary observer, trapped in the amber of a distorted time, a silent witness to the madness that bloomed in the heart of the Midwest.

Rutabaga-Free Story (Contains Bears)

By Marvin Knox

Right, then. A father, or what one might describe as a pater ursus in the parlance of the learned, found himself in a rather sticky wicket. One moment, he was anticipating the dulcet tones of the school bell, a sound akin to a tin can being kicked down a flight of stairs, and the next, a resonant growl, a basso profundo thrum that suggested the earth itself had indigestion. "Bear, bear, what do you see?" he croaked, or rather, ursus vociferans, the words a linguistic Möbius strip, a loop that led nowhere and everywhere simultaneously.

His daughter, erstwhile progeny, had transmogrified into a rose. A rose, mind you, not a cabbage, nor a rutabaga, but a Rosa damascena, a crimson explosion of petals nestled in what was once asphalt, now a verdant, mossy stone. "Rose, rose, what do you feel?" he pondered, though the words, once so readily available, now felt like trying to swallow a handful of broken glass. And above them, suspended like a diamond in a pawn shop window, a facet of impossible light, the lumen adamantinus, pulsed, refracting the scene into a veritable kaleidoscope of emotional flummery. Joy, a fractal explosion, sorrow, a silent implosion, a veritable smorgasbord of the soul.

The school, once a bastion of learning, had become a forest, a veritable silva obscura, its branches a latticework against a sky that shimmered with stars that looked suspiciously like misplaced sequins. Cars, those infernal combustion contraptions, had become wolves, lupus motoris, pacing the perimeter with eyes glowing like misplaced embers. The text itself, the very fabric of this narrative tomfoolery, began to shift. "Bear" became "Bair," then "Baer," each iteration a linguistic pratfall, a new flavor of the absurd. The rose, its fragrance a honeyed weight, a veritable nectar floralis, on the tongue, a symphony of green notes, the rustling leaves sounding like a philharmonic orchestra tuning up in a wind tunnel.

"Bear, Baer, Bair, what do you see?" he queried, peering into the diamond, a veritable speculum adamantinus, and seeing a superposition of identities, a veritable hall of mirrors in the funhouse of existence. He saw the rose, its petals whispering secrets, a veritable lingua floralis, a language of scent and color that would confound the finest cryptographer. He saw the wolves, their shadows stretching into the negative space, the umbra vacua, the silence between the trees a veritable vacuum of sound. He saw the reader, eyes wide with bewilderment, lector perplexus, knowing, yet utterly clueless.

The diamond pulsed, its light a veritable lux typographica, a wave of embodied typography. The words on the page danced, broke apart, looped back on themselves, a veritable typographic jig. The scent of roses, now a taste of honey, a veritable mel floralis, a memory of ancient forests, a veritable memoria silvarum, a physical space he could walk through, like stepping into a postcard. He remembered his ancestors, their paws sinking into the soft earth of bygone eras, a veritable vestigia temporis. He imagined his descendants, their eyes reflecting the same cosmic dance, a veritable chorus stellaris.

The story knew it was being read, a veritable narratio sapiens, anticipating the reader's reactions with the smugness of a fortune teller. The text grew mold, developed fault lines, became radioactive, a veritable textus corporeus, a living, breathing, decaying entity. The rose, a veritable rosa corporealis, began to bloom inwards, its petals forming words. "Diamon," then "Diamante," the diamond's name mutating, a veritable nomen adamantinus, its power revealed like a magician pulling a rabbit from a hat—only the rabbit is a badger, and the hat is a samovar.

The wolves, their forms shifting, their growls a symphony of strings, a veritable musica lupina, each note a different shade of green, a veritable color viridis. They were not wolves, but guardians, liminal observers, a veritable custodes liminales, unseen but ever-present, like a tax collector hiding in the shadows. The rose, a veritable porta temporis, a temporal palimpsest, showing glimpses of different eras, a veritable visio temporalis. The bears, or what were bears, their perceptions intertwined, yet distinct, a veritable perceptio geminata, saw each other, yet each saw themselves as the sole observer, a veritable solipsismus ursinus.

The father, the bear, the Bair, the Baer, felt his joy multiply exponentially, a veritable gaudium exponentialis, filling the air with a palpable sense of happiness, a veritable felicitas palpabilis. His sorrow divided into countless fragments, a veritable dolor fragmentatus, each one a tiny piece of his broken heart, a veritable cor fractum. Multiple incompatible realities stood simultaneously, a veritable realitas multiplex, forcing readers to hold irreconcilable possibilities, a veritable possibilitas incongrua. Magic and science, dreams and reality, all blurred into one, a veritable confusio mundi.

The diamond, a veritable fenestra temporis, a portal to all time, its facets showing glimpses of different eras, a veritable visio temporalis, reflected the rose, the forest, the wolves, the reader, a veritable speculum universale. The words evolved, transformed, developed their own etymologies, a veritable etymologia mutans. The absence of sound created a profound silence, a veritable silentium profundum, allowing the reader to fill in the gaps with their own imagination, a veritable imaginatio lectoris. The empty spaces between the roses became pathways to hidden truths, a veritable viae veritatis.

"Bear, bear, what do you see?" he queried, seeing the truth of human experience, fractured and beautiful, a veritable veritas fracta, a landscape of emotions, a veritable terra emotionum, a quantum superposition of being, a veritable superpositio quantica. He saw the reader, their eyes reflecting the same cosmic dance, a veritable chorus stellaris, their minds filled with the scent of roses, the taste of honey, the weight of the diamond, a veritable impressio sensoria.

Cited Ancient Texts (and perhaps a few questionable ones):

The Book of Bears, 12th Century (presumably)
Diamond Lore and Legend, 8th Century (if you say so)
Flowers of Forgotten Ages, 5th Century (I'll take your word for it)

Should Uniformity Emphasize
Agriculture or Human Sacrifice?

Spectacle Island:
A Cartography of Dispossession

By Frank Pantagruel

The gulls, like practiced thieves, dissect the air
above Spectacle Island's smoking crown—
early century's grime, a film on everything.
Small hands, chapped red even in muffled June,
dart towards gleam: a broken doll's blue eye
stares from the ash like a forgotten psalm.
Self-conscious, shoulders hunched against the view
from mainland ferries churning through salt-splash,
each treasure clutched—a small betrayal felt:
a rust-stained spoon, a bottle's jagged neck.
The clink and scrape, a language quickly learnt
beneath the city's distant, hazy speck.

Decades collapse. The doll's eye now a chip
of sapphire glass on Blue Hill Avenue,
beneath a 'Cash 4 Gold' sign's flickering script.
The screen door's rusty sigh repeats, repeats—
a metronome of urban entropy.
Down Quincy Street, the triple-deckers sag,
their porches webbed with shadows where between
the railings, a single sneaker, toe worn raw,
hangs by a fraying lace. The paint, once white,
now peels in brittle curls like sunburnt skin.

At Dudley Station—now Nubian—stark
beneath the elevated track's dark spine,
steel girders thick with pigeon lime inscribe
a story of corrosion. Light here slants
in narrow shafts, dust motes like memory
dancing where a 'Coming Soon' banner, torn,
still chants its faded promise to the wind.

Norfolk Street in Mattapan: the chain-link fence
a grid against the failing light. A can,
crushed flat, reflects a sliver of sky caught
in its metal stare. Weeds push through tar-cracks—
persistent, rough—the texture of neglect
a rasp against the bruising violet overhead.

An unseen basketball's rhythmic thud marks
the passing moments. Brickwork on closed stores
pitted with dark marks, initials carved
on initials, layered deep as years.
Storefront glass opaque with generations
of grime, of silence, of unspoken need.

The glint again—not treasure, but a shard
of something broken in the gutter's flow.
Same averted gaze, the psychic scar
re-drawn on weary streets where day and night
the silence amplifies each creak and snap.
The children's shame—a whisper in the breeze
that stirs the litter of these modern scenes,
a self-consciousness time cannot erase
but finds new bodies, new and bitter sweets.

The gulls still circle, indifferent and high,

above the city's ever-changing sky—
witnesses to this persistent script
of hunger, of survival, of eclipse.

Bucksport Reverie:
A Chronicle of Dust and Window

By Evgenija Adriana Papke

The vacuum, a snarling beast, ate decades. Not dust, memories. Fifty years of Dad's detritus, a landscape of crumpled newspapers, old fishing lures, and yellowed maps of routes never taken. My nephew, Finn, his eyes a blue as cold as the Penobscot, pushed a stack of National Geographics toward the open window. "Like snow," he said, his voice a flat, Maine twang.

"More like a landslide," I replied, the Chinese phrase luan (亂), meaning chaos, echoing in my head. It felt like a translation of this house, this life. Dad, a man of quiet hoarding, had left us a mountain to excavate.

Flashback: Lhasa market, the scent of yak butter tea, a vendor selling prayer flags. Then, the sterile white of the hospital, the doctor's words, a cold, clinical Mandarin. The image fractured, like a dream seen through a cracked mirror. Here, in Bucksport, the air smelled of salt and decay.

Finn, a teenager who spoke in the clipped phrases of internet slang, held up a tarnished silver locket. "What's this?"

Inside, a faded photo: Dad, younger, his face a map of lost dreams, and a woman with almond eyes and a smile that held the ghost of another world. "It's... a story," I said, the Tibetan word sangs (སངས་), meaning awake, a whisper in my mind.

The house, a wooden skeleton against the grey sky, became a vessel of displacement. Like the stories of my ancestors, forced to navigate borders, this house held the weight

of untold narratives. We were pushing out not just garbage, but the weight of unspoken words.

The vacuum whined, a mechanical prayer wheel. Old postcards, their images blurring, were swept into the swirling vortex. One showed a mountain, its peak shrouded in mist. Chomolungma? I wondered, then shook my head. No, Katahdin. But in this moment, the lines blurred. The mountains, the languages, the memories, all collapsing into a single, chaotic current.

We opened another window, and a gust of wind carried the dust and debris out, out into the grey expanse of the Maine sky. Like scattering ashes, I thought, a ritual without a ceremony. The wind, a restless spirit, carried the fragments of Dad's life, and perhaps, a part of mine, into the vast, indifferent world.

Finn, his face streaked with dust, looked at me. "Done?"

"Not even close," I said, a flicker of something like hope in my chest. The work of remembering is never done. The house, a testament to a life lived in the shadows, was now a canvas. We would paint it with our own stories, our own languages,
our own fractured, beautiful chaos.

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